

TOWN OF ACTON  
WASTEWATER ADVISORY NEIGHBORHOOD TASKFORCE  
(WANT)

MINUTES  
November 3, 2009  
7:00 p.m.  
Council On Aging Facility

In Attendance:

WANT members present: Lauren Rosenzweig, Michael Geis, Bill McInnis, Brett Murphy, Kent Sharp, Kerry Byrne

WANT members absent: Peter Mosbach

Town Staff: Doug Halley

Audience: Al English, Maureen Ryan-Friend, Diane Schaumburg, Nancy Tavernier, Matt Liebman, Tom Heinlein, Oleg Volinsky, and others

Meeting was called to order at 7:05 p.m. by Lauren Rosenzweig

I. Citizen's Concerns

No concerns

II. Minutes

There was a question from the audience about the accuracy of the statement that the neighborhood is in Zone's 3 and 4. Minutes are accurate. Although a clarification was discussed that Acton's Zone 1 is larger than that required by the State. Matt Liebman had comments on a coupe missing Q&A's that he thought should be in the minutes. Doug Halley clarified that the groundwater monitoring wells do not measure effects of storm water of surface water as the wells are capped. Doug also clarified that bacteria growth is happening in the summer.

III. Article sent by Mike Geis and Brett Murphy

There are two articles: the first is the executive summary of the EPA's 1997 report to congress on decentralized wastewater solutions. It states that decentralized systems can be adequate solutions.

Lauren explained the history of wastewater treatment solutions and how in the past sewer was considered best practice. In the last 10 years balanced solutions that depend on centralized (sewer) and decentralized systems have become the norm. Acton's CWRMP recommends both for different neighborhoods.

A second article was discussed. This article discussed the results of a study done in Sarasota County, FL. In that situation they found sewer more cost-effective in higher density neighborhoods and septic in lower density (lots sizes greater than 0.5 acres). Lauren pointed out that in developing Acton's CWRMP, they looked at sections of town where onsite systems (septic) are quite difficult. Some of these areas are where sewer are recommended.

Lauren pointed out that it is important to bring information to the task force, supportive or contradictory. We need to discuss the information.

The task force then discussed an additional set of online information on nitrates that Mike and Brett had forwarded. After some discussion it was agreed to strike a line in the CWRMP overview presentation that all agreed was not helpful: "At levels less than 10mg babies are dying".

Some discussion followed on how sewer treats wastewater better than septic, for example, sewer treatment removes volatile organic compounds (VOCs) like gasoline.

The task force agreed that it should vet and clarify presentations to ensure what WANT puts out is properly positioned. The process is to bring concerns back to WANT to discuss. We agreed that we should reference information and facts.

The EPA Executive Summary supports the town's position that septic can be a solution. In response to one of the advantages listed in the article that septic returns effluent to the local aquifer, Doug Halley pointed out that Acton has built a sewer treatment plant that returns effluent to the ground, so unlike some centralized systems it doesn't remove water from the local aquifers. The Nagog, North Acton system does the same, returning treated water back to the local aquifers.

Audience Question (AQ): Who runs the North Acton system? A contractor does. The State has some level of oversight of that system and recently required increased maintenance and therefore costs for the users went up.

AQ: Are references vetted by task force review? Mike & Brett found references and captured these in a presentation that was discussed earlier. This agenda item was to decide what WANT should do with this presentation and the other two articles.

AQ: Can we clarify or show the Executive Summary please? Task force agreed to send this out to the neighborhood with an introductory e-mail.

AQ: Will we have a presentation on septic options, not just sewer? Lauren answered that the initial presentation at the first WANT meeting was on the findings of the CWRMP.

AQ: Were there dissenters to recommending sewers for the STF neighborhood there during the CWRMP process? Lauren answered that she wasn't sure about STF in particular, but that it was a consensus decision. Questions were captured and answers provided as an Appendix in the CWRMP.

#### IV. Bill McInnis – discuss financial analysis of centralized vs on-site systems

Bill explained that since cost seemed to be a large issue at the special town meeting that he thought this might be an important area to provide information for this task force. He explained a little how costs were estimated for the original sewer district. He also explained the possibility of capturing all costs & benefits. He offered that we could provide a structure for capturing tangible and intangible costs and benefits, like possible increase in home value with sewer, or the ability to add-on to a house. Other intangible benefits include “surge capacity”; this is the ability to handle large surges in wastewater during a party with many people, for example. Others include the ability to put in a swimming pool.

WANT discussed how to proceed. Some expressed that it may be hard to estimate intangible benefits in a way that would be agreed to by all in the neighborhood. But addressing the cost comparison is important to help the neighborhood reach a decision. Another challenge here is the wide variance of the costs of a septic system. The task force discussed how we might be able to get actual, recent septic replacement costs. We agreed that we need to get better cost estimates for both sewer hookup and septic replacement.

We then discussed why the cost of septic systems varied. Bill explained that the biggest factor is the depth to groundwater due to the need for a mound or not. Trucking in the fill is a big cost. May need a retaining wall and may need a pump chamber. Could use an I&A system (advanced technology/process) but then there is more Operation & Maintenance costs.

Percolation (Perc) rate is also a factor. It determines how large the leech field needs to be, and therefore cost. If close to wetlands, then you may need Nitrate treatment, and that is costly. Ledge is also a factor and may require a mound. There are occasions where the leech field needs to be moved or the fill replaced.

Task Force Question (TFQ): Is there a way we can ask residents for the cost they incurred for septic replacement? Yes, BOH (Board of Health) agrees we can ask for that. But we can't be sure if we'll get accurate numbers.

Task Force Comment (TFC): We need to balance the cost consideration with the needs and solutions issues.

AQ: Each house used to be built with a second potential leech field, right? Some were, but some built before Title V may not have a second leech field that will meet Title V.

AQ: This is an issue for all of Acton, not just this neighborhood, so does everyone have an issue? The BOH will find a way to replace the septic system in those places where only septic is available. But they may have to replace the leech field. That may cost a lot and require a mound.

Audience Comment (AC): A mailing would be good, because we want to ensure people hook up to any sewer that comes through in the future. We want to ensure that people are on board. Members of the task force pointed out that more and more of the members of the previous sewer district are hooking up.

AC: Future officials may start requiring hook-up even if septic is still working. There aren't guarantees that we won't have to hook-up in the future. But this isn't likely.

TFQ: Can we get better estimates based on our groundwater data? It's difficult without an engineering estimate which is at least a couple thousand dollars. There are many factors to consider.

#### V. Certified mailing

The mailing would alert the neighborhood to the existence of the WANT and get everyone's e-mail and phone numbers. We agreed to bring a list of potential questions to the next meeting. This item was tabled until the next meeting.

#### VI. Outline of all the issues

We captured issues that the Task Force and audience members hoped to see addressed or consider by WANT. This topic will continue at the next meeting as many ideas were captured and we ran out of time.

#### VII. Calendar of meetings

Tabled until the next meeting

Meeting adjourned at 8:45pm